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## HAMLET PREPARES FOR ACTION

BY SAMUEL A. TANNENBAUM, M. D.

In a recent issue (April, 1917) of *Studies in Philology* Mr. Tucker Brooke puts forth the novel and ingenious theory that the justification for introducing "some seventy lines of melodramatic bombast," *i. e.*, the Pyrrhus-Priam-Hecuba story (in *Hamlet*, II, 2, 431-498), is to be found in the effect they have upon Hamlet, namely, in dispelling the fit of "blues" caused by disappointment or excessive introspection, in momentarily unclouding his brain and effecting "a brief moment of clear vision." If this is true, Hamlet's soliloquy ("O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!") which immediately follows the actor's exit must be quite logical and free from neurotic or psychopathic taint and should give us the key to the reason for Hamlet's delay in executing vengeance upon his lecherous, treacherous, murderous uncle. If it is true (as Mr. Brooke tries to convince us) that "Hamlet is never more normal than at the end of this long and carefully prepared soliloquy" we must agree with him, "keen and efficient thinker" that he is, in doubting "the trustworthiness of his supernatural visitor" and we must acquit him of attempting to evade his sacred duty by a bit of self-deception, by a subterfuge, by pretending to doubt the genuineness of the Ghost. In this "carefully prepared" soliloquy Mr. Brooke finds confirmation of Professor Bradley's theory of Hamlet's "melancholy" and, at the same time, "a wider intellectual range" than in any other soliloquy (except the seventh) in the play. For these reasons he insists that Hamlet's words about the possibility of the Ghost being the devil in disguise should not "be taken at less than their full face value."

To me this soliloquy and the circumstances surrounding it are thus all amiss interpreted. According to Mr. Brooke Hamlet has the "blues," is "in the lowest spirits he has shown," when the arrival of the strolling players is announced to him, and craves for strong excitement. "When the entertainment is over and Hamlet is left alone . . . he is in the position of a mountain climber long held inactive by befogging mist, when suddenly the cloud is dispelled and instantaneously he sees his course before him." In all this there are several serious errors. Hamlet is not "in the

lowest spirits he has shown" hitherto. He was much more despondent and life-weary when he longed for this too-too solid flesh to resolve itself into a dew and still more so after he heard the horrible tale of his uncle's treason, fratricide and incest. Nor does Hamlet seem to me to be suffering from the "blues" at this particular time. It is true that on this day he bid the fair Ophelia a long, unseemly and silent farewell, but when he meets the weak, fond, old man, her father, and fools him to the top of his bent, he seems, judging from his jocularity, his facetiousness, his insults, and his lewd allusions, to be quite reconciled to her loss. The encounter with the two simple and superficial "little eyases," Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, in which he indulges himself in a long and unprofitable discussion about the children players and in a rhapsody on mankind, leaves him in a state of exaltation marred only by a momentary bitterness when his mind suddenly reverts to the popularity of his uncle-father. The announcement of the arrival of the players at once dispels the gloom ("There did seem in him a kind of joy To hear of it") and his greeting to them manifests a buoyancy of spirits that puts the "blues" out of the question. Hamlet is never shown us in a happier frame of mind than he is at this moment. Thoughts of revenge are forgotten and once again—and for the last time—he is a boy, a student, an ardent devotee of the drama. What more natural than that, having at his command the tragedians of the city, he should want to hear his favorite speeches recited? It is not because he craves for excitement or because a play alleviates the "blues" that he wants the players to stay, but because he can't resist the temptation of the moment and, this probably wholly unconsciously, because for the time being it puts off the acting of the Ghost's dread command.

Although it is not of much relevance to our present discussion, we may point out that a person suffering from a momentary or fugitive attack of the blue devils does not crave for excitement or indulge in mirthful sarcasms or seek entertainment. One who craves for excitement is not despondent and surely not melancholic. The melancholic's interest is so self-centered that he cannot take any interest in what goes on about him; he refuses to be drawn out of himself. Hamlet is boyish and unhappy in this scene but not melancholic. That Hamlet is not in a state of normal mental health we admit, but his malady is neither the "blues" nor "melancholy."

Mr. Brooke is of the opinion that Shakespere chose that particular speech for the actor's recital because "the Pyrrhus-Priam-Hecuba story furnishes a kind of parallel to the Hamlet-Claudius-Gertrude story," because it serves as "an exciting bit of dramatic entertainment," and because "it continues the rather good-natured protest concerning the 'little eyases' by an obvious [!] parody of the turgid lines on the death of Priam" in Marlowe and Nashe's play of "Dido, Queen of Carthage." This may all be very well as far as Shakespere goes, but it leaves wholly unanswered a much more important and hitherto unconsidered question, *videlicet*: why did Hamlet want to hear "Aeneas' tale to Dido," a speech that, he tells us, he had heard but once. (Whether Hamlet had heard this unacted or at most only once-acted play before or after his father's death is as unascertainable as the date of his letter to Ophelia. As regards such details Shakespere was very careless.) If it had been merely that Hamlet wanted distraction or craved for excitement, or (which I do not admit) that Shakespere wanted to parody Nashe, or that he chose this method of depicting Hamlet's interest in dramatic art and his quality as a critic, many another speech would have served the poet's turn. Hamlet's interest in that "passionate speech" is the problem for us.

Since the publication of Professor Freud's fascinating and highly instructive book, "The Psychopathology of Every-day Life," we know that there is no accident in the domain of mental phenomena, that every thought that floats into an individual's consciousness is determined by conscious or unconscious forces in his soul. Hamlet is painfully conscious of the fact that for some inexplicable reason, notwithstanding that he was solicited thereto by heaven and hell, and has the cause, means, will, and strength to do it, he cannot bring himself to such a pitch of berserker rage as to plunge his fatal sword into the entrails of the villain who had murdered his father, seduced his mother, and "popped in between the election and his hopes." The student from Wittenberg, whose disposition is shaked with thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls, cannot deliberately kill a human being, the paragon of animals. O, cursed spite that ever he was born to set it right! If only this thing were not to do, if he could only forget it! Not to think of his duty he must think of other matters. But the repressed thought of his painful duty unconsciously influences all his thoughts and actions

and, his attention being off its guard during his colloquy with the players, determines his choice of the gruesome narrative of "old grandsire" Priam's cruel butchery by the "rugged" (*i. e.*, fierce) "hellish Pyrrhus." This tale impressed him and stuck in his memory because he too had to "kill a king," because he found himself in some of the lines of the narrative, and because the unnamed poet, whose sentiments are expressed in the comments on Hecuba (ll. 490-498), undoubtedly shared Hamlet's horror of the deed. "Young Pyrrhus" (so Shakespere elsewhere calls him), like "young Hamlet," finds "his antique sword rebellious to his arm, repugnant to command"; he too, as a painted tyrant, "like a neutral to his will and matter," did nothing until "aroused vengeance set him new a-work." That Shakespere changes Vergil's "brassy arms" to "sable arms" serves to heighten the resemblance between the two young men. How utterly revolting to Hamlet such a deliberate murder is, the poet indicates in a subtle touch that has escaped all the commentators. It will be noted that when Hamlet attempts to recall to memory the first line (l. 431) of the speech under consideration he makes a mistake; some words ("like the Hyrcanian beast") spring to consciousness which really occur nowhere in the speech, nor, as far as concerns us, in the old play of "Dido." The significance of this false recollection is evident if we bear Freud's rule, *ut supra*, in mind and remember that the Hyrcanian tiger was proverbial of all that is barbarous and savage. Hamlet's unconscious judgment of Pyrrhus could hardly be better indicated.

How smart a lash that speech doth give Hamlet's conscience is evidenced clearly enough by the passionate vehemence of the outburst of self-abuse he indulges in as soon as he is alone. He is a beast that lives but to sleep and feed, coward-like he wastes his time in fruitless meditation; he is a rascal, a villain, a dreamer, an ass, and what not. He who has sworn to wipe away all trivial fond records, all pressures past that youth and observation copied in the book and volume of his brain, is entertaining a troupe of actors instead of sweeping to his revenge. There is here no "vain search" for the cause of his inaction but a bad attack of the "blues" brought on by the realization of the difference between himself and the deed-achieving Pyrrhus. In this mood of utter despondency he suddenly resolves, as suddenly and as needlessly as he had decided to put an antic disposition on, to have the players

enact "The Murder of Gonzago" before the court. What it was beyond the presence of the actors that prompted him to this futile and dangerous step can only be conjectured. Many critics, Mr. Brooke among them, think it was an honest desire to catch the conscience of the king and thus corroborate the Ghost. With this view I, and others whose judgments cry in the top of mine, cannot agree. Had Hamlet been sincere in his doubts as to the Ghost's honesty we should have heard of it ere this and he would not have spoken of it at the very end of his soliloquy as a kind of after-thought, a kind of justification for again putting off his father's commandment. Besides, had he been convinced of the righteousness of his motive in staging "the Mouse-trap" he would not, could not, have indulged in such a tempestuous torrent of incoherent self-abuse and accused himself of being "unpregnant of his cause." His whole speech is permeated with a conviction of the justice of his cause, a belief in the trustworthiness of his supernatural visitant. But the deed that is required of him is so repugnant to his nature that he snatches at any excuse for delay. Mr. Brooke is quite right when he says that "Hamlet is never more normal than at the end of his long soliloquy." Why shouldn't he be? He has not only gained time but excellently salved his conscience. (If Mr. Brooke's theory of the poet's purport in introducing the Pyrrhus-Priam incident were correct, Hamlet's mental condition ought to be normal at the beginning of his soliloquy, not at the end of it.) How desperately Hamlet casts about for a good excuse for delay is also indicated in his willingness to look upon himself as one afflicted with a "weakness and melancholy," evidently forgetting that he was mad only north-north-west and knew a hawk from a handsaw. To one acquainted with the unconscious workings of the mind this piling up of excuses speaks eloquently of a strong unconscious will against the contemplated deed. Professor Bradley rightly designates Hamlet's doubt about the true character of the Ghost as an "unconscious fiction," thus acquitting our hero of hypocrisy.

Hamlet is nowhere less the "keen and efficient thinker" than in his third soliloquy. Here as elsewhere he is more truly the creature of his passions, whims, and caprices than any other great Shakesperean character, King Lear only excepted. As soon as the actors are gone he falls into a paroxysm of railing at himself for

inaction, notwithstanding the fact that he has just taken the first step toward really doing something. (This excessive self-reproach under these circumstances is, to the clinical psychologist, further proof of the insincerity of Hamlet's ostensible purpose.) Then, apparently ignorant of the fact that the actor's passion was wholly assumed and in no way indicative of his character, he lashes himself for not being like him. The "keen thinker" reviles himself for unpacking his heart with words and yet compares himself, to his disadvantage, with an actor whose business is nothing but words, and borrowed words at that. Had Hamlet really wished to do the deed required of him, he would have whetted his almost blunted purpose by taking example not from the hireling who recited the story but from the determined, ruthless, and single-motived Pyrrhus whose deed the poet chronicled in the stirring tale that had so impressed itself on his memory. This would have been a logical, simple, straight-forward Hamlet, whose words might be taken at "their full face value," but not Shakespere's Hamlet.

*New York City.*

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